



Amtrak on FEC idea moves rapidly; perhaps three years before the trains visit coast

August 9, 12:13 PM · Leo King - Jacksonville Transportation Examiner



Photos / Leo King

On April 28, Amtrak sent a three-car train with two engines south to Miami, as seen here, crossing St. John's River Bridge at milepost 0.0. Three days later, along with two other cars picked up from its Hialeah Yard. The train moved northward at 79 mph giving VIPs and media a sample of what it would be like riding Florida East Coast Ry. tracks from Miami to Jacksonville. See [Smooth track is highlight of Amtrak ride over FEC: scheduled service in a few years? published in Examiner on May 3.](#)

By Leo King

Jacksonville Transportation Examiner

Amtrak and the Florida DOT are moving at record speed in getting the job done and getting Amtrak to run Amtrak trains from Jacksonville to Miami via the Florida East Coast Ry. Two round-trip trains would pass along the route under current plans, and would cost about \$250 million to prepare the freight line for passenger trains, including stations – and all that could take three years.

In a status update for the Amtrak and FEC Corridor Project application for federal funding, which was due on Friday, Michael Busha, Executive Director of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Center (TCRPC), which includes Indian River, St. Lucie, Martin, and Palm Beach Counties, exclaimed, "The effort put forth by FDOT and its consultants, along with local governments, Amtrak, and agencies, has been truly remarkable!"

Glenn McLain, a member of the online FEC Railway group, posted late Friday, "FDOT just contacted us to inform they've signed the agreement in principle and are uploading the application now."

Earlier, Noel Weaver Jr. wrote, "I just got word tonight that the application for the federal funds went in today, which was the deadline. I think we have an excellent chance to see passenger service on the FEC before too long. It appears that everybody involved is very much in favor of this. I know Amtrak wants it."

Weaver is a retired Conrail locomotive engineer and was heavily involved in getting Amtrak's demonstration train to the FEC in May.



Looking east crossing the St. Johns River Bridge, the view from a train offers a great view of Jacksonville as well as the river.

Busha said, "Florida DOT and Amtrak are working through a key document – an 'agreement in principle' that contains the terms and conditions under which the project will be implemented. Discussions regarding this document are on-going and include reference to liability provisions. This document must be completed for the application to be submitted for funding. It's the last big hurdle."

His e-mail was written and sent before word came that the agreement was done.

Busha explained, "Incredible progress has been in the past several months. Documents [were] completed in record time, and the project funding application is on the verge of completion."

He said, "The next funding opportunity for the project is this pending round of High Speed-Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) funding. \$2.35 billion is available," and he added, "The funding is regular appropriations, not from the federal stimulus package. It's a chance to bring Florida tax dollars home to invest in our economy without delay."

Offering specifics in an e-mail to TCRPC members, he stated, the federal environmental assessment is done. He said, "Trains are a green form of transportation.

"To remedy a deficiency in the 2009 funding application, Florida DOT was informed it needed to complete a *National Environmental Policy Act of 1969* (NEPA) environmental assessment for a next funding application to be considered complete. As of Wednesday afternoon (August 4), the document is now complete, including the necessary 'letters of concurrence' from state and federal agencies – all in record time."

A federal agency administers the labyrinthine program.

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) administers the program. The agency states on its web site it highlighted the "central importance the environmental review process, required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and related laws and regulations, (including Section 106 of the *National Historic Preservation Act* and 49 U.S.C. 303, which protects public parks, recreation areas, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and historic sites) plays in the implementation of the program."

FRA identified its approach for "melding the NEPA process with the HSIPR program in the June 17, 2009 Guidance (74 Fed. Reg. 29900 (June 23, 2009)). In many ways the choice of the appropriate funding track for a project depends on the stage of NEPA review that the specific proposal has reached," and added, "Extensive planning and environmental review is needed to support the development and implementation of a large scale intercity and high-speed rail program."

People got on and off the special at every stop, including here, at St. Augustine.



Busha said the public outreach process is done.

“Working together between May and July, Florida DOT, the RPCs, Amtrak, local governments, and agencies conducted 34 public hearings including, public information workshops, design sessions to develop station plans, and presentations to city councils and commissions. Hundreds of citizens and property owners participated in the workshops. Multiple station locations were reviewed in the eight cities, concept plans were developed, and due diligence conducted. In the six weeks between June and mid-July, all eight cities adopted resolutions that confirmed the recommended station locations. These resolutions indicating ‘locally preferred alternatives’ for stations are another required piece of the application.”

Trains would come from CSX’s “A Line” in Jacksonville and join FEC iron about a half-mile south of TY and YH Yards on the North Bank. FEC owns both yards, but CSX operates them. The trains would continue to the former Jacksonville Terminal, built in 1919, and now the Prime Osborn Convention Center. It would be the Jacksonville terminus for trains arriving from New York and Washington, D.C. that would travel over the FEC to Miami, and for trains arriving from South Florida.

Barely one-fourth mile south of Jacksonville Terminal, the trains would cross FEC’s St. Johns River Bridge in Jacksonville. FEC milepost (MP) 0.0 is at the south end of the rolling lift bridge in South Bank, even though the railroad own tracks two miles north of there, including both yards.

Other stations would be located at St. Augustine, Daytona Beach, Titusville, Cocoa, Melbourne, Vero Beach, Fort Pierce and Stuart.

From near West Palm Beach, MP 298, the trains would cross over to CSX for the journey to Miami, which would actually be as far as the City of Hialeah where Amtrak currently terminates in Florida. FEC and CSX parallel each other closely southward from that point, some 50 miles to Hialeah. The community is adjacent to Miami.

Busha said many people showed up at the local hearings.

“The outpouring of public support for the project is unlike any transportation project that anyone can remember. Hundreds of citizens and local governments packed city council chambers to learn about the project, help locate stations, and show their support for the pending service.”

He said support came from 160 different local governments, agencies, and organizations [that] have provided letters and resolutions of support for the project. The application also includes letters of support from Gov. Charlie Crist (I), U.S. Sens. Bill Nelson (D) and George LeMieux (R), several U.S. Representatives and state solons.

TCRPC Growth Management Coordinator Kim Delaney, said, “It’s been nonstop for the past several weeks.”

She said that both she and Busha rode the Amtrak-FEC special.

“Mr. Busha and I both boarded the train in Stuart and deboarded in St. Augustine.”

Delaney said, “The Florida DOT application indicates service would start in 34 months,” which was the “identical timeframe indicated in last year’s application which is on the Florida DOT website. The one submitted Friday is on the FRA website somewhere but not yet posted on Florida DOT’s.”

Busha said Amtrak, FDOT and its consultants have been working around the clock to complete the draft funding application for the next round of High-Speed Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) funding.

The train schedule calls for two round-trip trains per day with an improved schedule, a ridership estimate increased to 226,000 annual riders resulting from an improved schedule, costs cut to \$250 million, and matching funds would be 33 percent secured (above the 20 percent requirement - from existing state and local activities).

Busha pointed out “Project supporters understand the Amtrak-FEC project represents an immediate opportunity to provide passenger rail service from Jacksonville to West Palm Beach, and increase service south to Miami. It also opens the door for rail service to eight communities immediately – St. Augustine, Daytona Beach, Titusville, Cocoa, Melbourne, Vero Beach, Fort Pierce, and Stuart with the opportunity to expand service to other communities in future phases.”

He noted 8.3 million Floridians live along the corridor, and would create immediate jobs and 2,100 in three years. Long-term revenues would bring in more than \$2 billion in land development over time.

Useful websites: <http://tcrpc.org/index.html>

www.dot.state.fl.us/planning/economicstimulus/

www.amtrak.com

www.fra.gov

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Amtrak business car *Beech Grove* brought up the rear of the inspection train.

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